Lesson Observation: The Key to Teacher Development

By Thomas Tenjoh-Okwen

The last decade has witnessed a shift of emphasis in teacher education from teacher training to teacher development with teacher educators arguing that training methods only provide teachers with ritual teaching behavior (Maingay 1988) instead of preparing them to cope with the ever-demanding profession of teaching in an ever-changing world. This paper describes how lesson observation can be used for ESOL teacher development at both the pre-service teacher education stage as well as at the in-service stages.

First, a distinction will be made between teacher training and teacher development with special reference to Cameroon. Second, an observation model for ESOL teacher development will be suggested. Third, a new role-that of teacher developer through lesson observation-will be assigned to the ESOL inspector.

Teacher Training and Teacher Development

A distinction has been made between teacher training and teacher development with respect to their conceptual framework and implementation. Teacher development is viewed as a continuous process that begins with pre-service teacher preparation and spans the entire career of the teacher (Sithamparam and Dhamotharam 1992). Teacher training involves giving novices and experienced teachers alike "ready-made answers" as opposed to "allowing them to discover their own alternatives" (Lucas, 1988:42). According to Davis and Plumb (1988:40) training entails a "pre- planned" agenda set by the workplace or syllabus as opposed to an "impromptu, flexible agenda set by groups;" "needs of workplace" as opposed to "personal needs;" "qualification" as opposed to "career development;" "leader and experts" as opposed to "peer group;" and "standardization" as opposed to "innovation."

Irvine-Niakaris and Bacigal (1992:42) see "the trainee passively undergoing a period of conditioning during which the "dos" and the "don'ts" of classroom practice are inculcated. Only after this basic training does the teacher trainer become concerned about empowering trainees to become agents in their own development, much in the same way that the scales must be mastered before a would-be pianist is able to interpret a sonata." Freeman (1989:39) defines training as a strategy for direct intervention by the collaborator in the teacher's teaching. "The intervention is focused on specific outcomes achieved through a sequence of steps, within a specific period of time. It is based on the assumption that through mastery of discrete skills, teachers will be effective in the classroom." Freeman considers development as a strategy of influence and indirect intervention that comes with complex, integrated aspects of teaching. These parts are idiosyncratic and individual. The purpose of development is for the teacher to generate change through increasing or shifting his/her awareness.

Lesson Observation

Some of our practices regarding lesson observation for training were handed down from our colonial master. We need to change them.

What is lesson observation, and how does it relate to teacher development? Simply put, lesson observation means sitting in on a class and observing a teacher in action. Maingay divides lesson observation into four categories: observation for training, observation for development, observation for assessment, and observer development.

Observation for training.

1. Student teachers (STs) are taught to produce elaborate, step by step, rigid lesson plans, which they usually abandon as useless and time consuming once they leave school. Typical examples include the pre-service primary school format designed by our primary school teacher training colleges and the American Peace Corps "six-point-lesson."

2. There is usually no meeting between the observer and the teacher prior to the observation. Sometimes there is a non- structured, post-observation meeting and where this exists, data collected during the lesson may touch on everything the observer could see. The feedback is often uni-directional in which the observer is the expert who tells the ST what s/he did well and what s/he did poorly. Some observers, often the teacher trainer, take delight in dishing out observation data in devastating language-negative, judgmental feedback that only discourages the neophyte.

3. The trainer-observer usually "pops in" and "pops out" of the classroom at will; s/he seldom (if ever) observes a full lesson.

4. Often the trainer-observer stands outside looking in on more than one lesson at a time by shuttling from one classroom window to another. When the observer does enter a classroom, s/he either takes the ST's lesson plan and walks out or sits in briefly before walking out.

5. The trainer-observer may interrupt ongoing lessons at will without any prior agreement with the ST concerned as to when and how s/he may intervene (see Footnote 1 below).

6. There are generally no records/reports kept on STs during teaching practice (TP). Evaluation is based solely on one or two lessons taught under examination conditions with one or more examiners determining the "fate" of the candidate. There are few clearly defined objective criteria for grading these lessons.

7. Demonstration lessons, a vital element of training, often given by the trainer or the cooperating teacher (COOPT) are meant to be imitated by the ST resulting in what Maingay calls "ritual teaching behavior."

8. STs are rarely given a chance to try out techniques that are unknown to the COOPT or the trainer-observer especially when this observer is another one of the teachers in the institution.

9. There is generally no COOPT to observe lessons on a lesson-to-lesson basis as the class teacher is often away "having other fish to fry."

10. COOPT teachers instruct ST's and ensure that instructions leading to conditioned behavior are carried out without due consideration to initiatives that the ST may want to take.

11. Generally feedback in training is judgmental, firm and directive.

Observation for teacher development

Having outlined the features of lesson observation for training in the Cameroonian setting, I will now turn to those that characterize lesson observation for development.

1. The ST is not instructed to reproduce a prescribed lesson plan. Instead the ST is provided with broad guidelines and explanatory notes justifying the inclusion of certain activities based on lesson objectives.

2. Lesson observation is cyclical consisting of a pre-observation meeting, the observation itself, and a post-observation meeting.

3. There is always a COOPT-usually the class teacher fulfilling the role of a teaching partner.

4. The lesson observer is a full partner in the TP exercise; s/he is punctual, sits in during the entire lesson, taking notes (data) on the goals/targets set at the pre-observation discussion.

5. The observer does not intervene during the lesson unless the whens and the hows have been agreed upon during the pre-observation meeting.

6. The observer, if a COOPT, writes a summarative report on the ST, counting toward the final assessment of the ST.

7. The observer and ST hold pre-and post-observation meetings. Pre-observation meetings are held well ahead of the lesson so as to provide enough time for the ST to make necessary lesson plan adjustments, additions, and refinements. Post-observation meetings are held (preferably) immediately after the lesson has been observed.

8. Demonstration lessons are given whenever the need is felt. Such demonstration lessons, especially in in-service programmes, are considered as options/alternatives among many. In that sense, they are considered "model" lessons to be imitated.

9. Feedback is given in the most objective manner possible as the observer tries to avoid being judgmental.

10. The COOPT is a facilitator and remains supportive and a full partner in the education process.

11. The observer, if a COOPT, hands over his/her entire class to the ST as early as possible and continues to work with the ST as described in 4.

12. The COOPT encourages the ST to experiment with new techniques or ideas.

13. A record file is kept on the ST's general conduct and work during the TP and constitutes the core of the summarative report to be written by the COOPT at the end of the practicum. The report is of paramount importance in determining whether or not the ST is qualified for certification. Where a practical teaching examination is required, the ST is called upon to teach several lessons and is examined by a panel comprising the COOPT, the teacher trainer, and a person from the Ministry of Education, the school board, or the department of teacher education. Clearly defined criteria are used by the examiners for the assessment of the ST.

The Cyclical Supervisory Model of Lesson Observation

The cyclical supervisory model (see diagram above) consists of the same three phases of the teacher development model. During the pre-observation meeting, the observer (who may be the ST's colleague, the ESOL inspector, or a teacher educator) and the teacher himself/herself set a limited number of professional "targets." These may be any aspect(s) of the lesson that the ST in-service trainer would like the observer to target. Depending upon the needs of a particular ST/teacher, both the observer and the teacher may choose to run through a checklist established for this purpose consisting essentially of the following: lesson topic, lesson content, objectives, materials, prerequisite learning, lesson development, closure, student evaluation, etc. It is vital to hold this meeting well in advance of the observation to enable the teacher or ST to revise the lesson plan or other aspects of the class before the lesson is taught.

Pre-observation meetings are the time when the teacher and the observer can agree upon issues such as the observer's intervention during the lesson proper. Some teachers do not want intervention but others do. Peer teaching roles can also be discussed and assigned. The observer may refer the ST to relevant literature that may help in lesson planning and execution. S/he may also help the ST get access to specialized libraries which would otherwise have been impossible.

The second phase of the clinical supervisory model is the observation of the lesson itself. At this stage, the observer focuses strictly on the targets set at the pre-observation meeting and collects relevant data for the teacher's attention. The data thus collected constitute a vital part of the content of the ST's teaching profile.

The third and final phase of the cyclical supervisory model is the post- observation meeting at which the teacher and observer look back at the lesson and the data gathered. Another controversial issue is how feedback should be given during this phase of observation. Some teacher educators suggest that data should be presented in the most nonjudgemental manner

possible giving the teacher the opportunity to analyze the data, and to make decisions as to its significance. Others suggest that positive feedback should be given to create a good climate for further discussion of the lesson, and to give the ST a sense of accomplishment. Still, others say that the "good" points of the lesson should be pointed out to the teacher while the "bad" ones should be given in the form of suggestions for improvement. There are some who say that the trainer/observer should not be hypocritical and should tell the trainee what s/he did right or wrong in a direct manner.

My own position on giving feedback to STs during post-observation meetings is simply to be eclectic for the simple reason that no single procedure will cover all teaching situations across all cultures. In some situations, telling the ST directly and firmly what to do and what not to do may be the only acceptable way, but in others this may be rejected for fear of encouraging dependency. In some contexts, dialogue journals kept by the ST and shared with the observer are the most efficient way of giving feedback (see Footnote 2 below).

Whatever the approach adopted, the goal is to make the teacher an independent decision maker at all times. The means to achieve this ideal may differ from setting to setting but this goal is primary.

The Role of the ESOL Inspector

In Cameroon, the Inspector of Education is the direct representative of the Ministry of Education. The inspector's responsibility is to ensure the strict implementation of laws and regulations on educational matters and policy as stipulated by the state, country, board, community, etc. Inspectors write reports which determine whether or not teachers deserve promotion, salary increment, suspension, or even dismissal. The inspector's reports say unequivocally what s/he considered the teacher did right or wrong, and state what the teacher should do in subsequent lessons. The report usually carries a grade. The inspector is respected by some and dreaded by many. What I see as necessary in in- service development programs is for the inspector to take on a more "humane" role.

In some countries of Francophone Africa, the Ministry Education prescribes the textbooks for use at primary and secondary schools. It is usually the subject inspector who selects these texts from among the many available on the academic market. These texts and their methodologies should be introduced to the teachers through national, and regional seminars by the ESOL inspectors. Where demonstration lessons are needed the clinical supervision model is recommended. Since the participants would normally be in-service teachers, post- observation discussion may explore alternative procedures, or techniques.

The ESOL inspector should go to the schools where teachers have no formal professional education. In such schools, workshops and demonstration lessons can be given, and real lessons should be observed under the leadership of the inspector. Where this is not possible, the inspector should invite or recommend such teachers to attend seminars on topics that would be of particular interest to them.

Lesson Observation by Peers

In some school systems, there exist subject heads or department chairpersons whose role includes coordinating examinations and keeping official records This official role can be extended to embrace teacher development as well. Colleagues less fortunate in terms of professional training can be helped within the department with the chairperson playing the roles of coordinator, demonstrator, organizer, etc.

It is within ESOL departments that teacher development through peer training/peer development/peer observation can be effectively carried out. In this regard, the procedure for peer observation, recently recommended by Richards et al. (1991-1992), may be adopted.

This procedure is patterned, in part, on the clinical supervision model. At the pre-observation orientation session, teachers meet and discuss exactly the kind of lesson, methods, techniques, classes etc. they would like to watch, whether in groups or on a teacher-to-teacher basis. Once these preliminaries are decided upon, then the teachers discuss what the teacher observer has to look for during a lesson. The teacher to be observed then assigns the observer a goal for the observation. At the post-observation meeting, the observer reports on the data collected and discusses them objectively.

In settings where inspectors are appointed on the basis of some nepotistic, tribal, regional or linguistic criteria, development is severely handicapped. But in settings where inspectors and school administrators are appointed from among the most qualified and experienced-professionals-where teachers, student- teachers, inspectors, pupils, and school administrators are considered equal partners in teacher development-the framework for teacher development presented in this paper can contribute immensely to the quality of English language teaching.

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Footnote 1

1. As a pupil in a practicing school some 35 years ago, I saw, to my greatest astonishment, a teacher trainer seize chalk from a trainee after shouting insults at him in a manner typical of a haughty colonial inspector, continue the lesson, leaving the trainee utterly flabbergasted before us, his pupils.

Footnote 2

2. Dialogue journals can be directed or non-directed/ open. In a non-directed or open dialogue journal, the student teacher pursues any topic of his/her choice. Questions on suitability of materials, class participation, specific techniques, etc. can be asked by the student teacher and answered by the supervisor/trainer. In directed journals, students are assigned topics to explore. The assignment may be traditional, in which the trainer gives the topics, and student-teachers produce texts. Sometimes the topics are set by the student teachers themselves (Winer & Steffensen, 1992:23.)